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Quick Quips, Quick Action as Baker Takes Charge

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 2 — Howard H. Baker Jr. took command of the White House as President Reagan's new chief of staff today, and displayed both the good humor and the practical political sense that marked his four-year tenure as majority leader of the Senate.

At a news conference this afternoon, Mr. Baker denied suggestions that he might become a "prime minister," leading the Government while Mr. Reagan functioned mainly as chief of state. "I am acutely aware of the fact," said Mr. Baker, who has long dreamed of occupying the Oval Office himself, "that Ronald Reagan is the President and I am not."

But it was clear today that a powerful new force was now helping to guide an Administration that has been dominated and distracted for three months

by the Iran-contra scandal, the President's illness, and the troubles of Mr. Baker's predecessor, Donald T. Regan.

A Different View of Congress

One sign of Mr. Baker's influence was the announcement that the nomination of Robert M. Gates as Director of Central Intelligence was being withdrawn. Mr. Baker had praised Mr. Gates, now the Deputy Director, and encouraged his selection, but when his nomination appeared doomed on Capitol Hill, the new chief moved swiftly to cut the Administration's losses and minimize the political damage.

Mr. Regan, in contrast, had battled repeatedly with Congress, adopting what Senator Robert C. Byrd, the Democratic leader, called an "us versus them" attitude.

And in a White House where wit and cheerfulness have been in very short supply, Mr. Baker breezed in with an armful of snappy lines and quick smiles. At a Cabinet meeting this morning, he told James C. Miller 3d, the budget director, to discuss the budget "if he had the courage."

At his news conference, he blushed a bit in answering a question about Nancy Reagan, and her influence in the White House. Hearing a telephone ring in the background, Mr. Baker cracked: "I expect she's on the phone now."

In describing Mr. Baker's first Cabinet meeting, Marlin Fitzwater, the President's spokesman, said it had been marked by "a refreshing openness and candor on all sides."

Thoughts on Reagan's Memory

But even as he was trying to put a new face on a troubled White House today, Mr. Baker was constantly reminded of the sharp criticisms raised by the Tower Commission about the President's lack of attention and alert-

ness on major policy matters.

"I think the President was damaged by some allegations of the Tower Commission," Mr. Baker said at the news conference, "but it's more important that he survived, and I think he's going to grow from this point in strength and popularity."

Mr. Baker acknowledged that in a discussion with a reporter for The Miami Herald last week, he had criticized the President's ability to remember complex matters over a long period of time.

Asked about that today, Mr. Baker said that when Mr. Reagan was well-prepared, he was "as good as anyone in a give-and-take discussion." But when asked about the meeting "two weeks or two months later," the chief of staff added, "You found that the half-life of that memory was short."

"But so is mine," Mr. Baker said to the reporters, "and so is yours, I suspect." After a day of meetings with his new boss, Mr. Baker insisted that "he's never been better."

Facing an Awesome Task

In eight years as Republican leader in the Senate, Mr. Baker came to the White House almost every week, and he is probably as familiar with the workings of government as any man to hold the staff job. Yet today, he said, he had changed his mind about one thing — "the difficulty of getting your arms around this mechanism down here."

In a tone of awe, he described the White House as a "big, big staff operation" and indicated that any changes he made in personnel would be done "carefully and deliberately."

Nevertheless, Mr. Baker wasted little time in starting to bring in his own team of assistants and reorder the staff structure in light of criticisms leveled at the Administration by the Tower Commission report last week.

Mr. Baker named A.B. Culvahouse, a close associate of long standing and a partner in Mr. Baker's law firm, to the sensitive post of White House counsel. He replaces Peter J. Wallison, who was known for his loyalty to Mr. Regan.

Mr. Baker told reporters that there would be "no wholesale firings." But Mr. Fitzwater added, "I'm sure you will see some changes in the process of how the White House is managed."

Starting With a Clean Slate

"I think we have entered a rebuilding period here as far as the President is concerned," the spokesman said. "He wants to get down to the business of working out the processes and procedures for putting the Tower board recommendations into effect."

A close associate of Mr. Baker said

that the new chief of staff is likely to make major changes in the weeks ahead. "He wants to start clean with his own people," said the associate, "and I think the President's given him that kind of latitude."

"He's trying to get out of there the people who caused the problem, or at least were perceived as causing the problem," the Baker associate said.

The Tower Commission concluded that this position was most likely in error, and that the President gave his endorsement before the transaction was completed.

As for Mr. Baker himself, one close friend said the chief of staff's job was a "perfect way out" of a difficult problem. Mr. Baker retired from the Senate in 1984 with the intention of running for President, and in recent months he had

become practically invisible in the political world.

"He wanted to be President," the friend said. "I don't think he could bring himself to run, but he couldn't bring himself to say that he wasn't going to do it, either. He was looking for something to happen, so he wouldn't have to make the decision."

In the last two years, the friend added, Mr. Baker felt a bit isolated from the daily turbulence of a capital where he had been such a key figure for so long. "He reached the point where he really missed the action," the friend said. "All this was going on, and he wasn't a player."

Today, as he stood in the White House press room, with cameras snapping and questions flying, Howard Baker was a player again.